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A PRIMER ON MANAGING INTERGROUP CONFLICT IN A MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE



COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS
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INTRODUCTION

This Primer is intended to give managers a straightforward guide to recognizing and managing intergroup conflict in the workplace.

I. WHY SHOULD YOU READ THIS PRIMER?

Whether you're a manager or supervisor, whether you're facing the necessity of making severe cuts in budgets and staff, or simply handling the everyday tensions of work, you know that overseeing a multiracial/multi cultural staff can be a complex task. Your decisions can have the effect of creating, lessening, or altogether avoiding conflict among different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups. Managing conflict is one of the most important and challenging responsibilities of any supervisor or manager.

Do the following scenarios sound familiar to you?

- Discussion among employees about a racially charged public event, such as a highly publicized court trial or police shooting, has triggered divisions among employees roughly along racial lines. Employees who once worked well together appear to be having difficulty getting along.
- The demographics of your workforce have dramatically changed over the last decade. As more women, Gay men and Lesbians, Latinos, Asian Americans and African Americans have joined your staff, employee dynamics have changed. Reports and rumors of discriminatory incidents come to your attention. Lawsuits alleging unlawful discrimination have been filed by employees and/or members of the public. Your company is having to dedicate more and more of its assets to pay for lawsuit settlements and jury verdicts.
- As manager or supervisor, you receive the

order to lay off a quarter of your staff. After careful evaluation of your staffing needs and other considerations, you give notice to those employees that they will be laid off in two weeks. As word spreads around about who has been let go and who will stay, it becomes apparent to almost everyone that certain racial/ethnic groups have been disproportionately impacted by the layoffs. As time goes on, you begin to notice certain employees avoiding contact with others. The division seems to be along racial/ethnic lines. Morale is low. Teamwork and productivity suffer as tensions among employees rise.

What would you, as manager, do when faced with these situations? The manner in which such tensions are addressed may serve to exacerbate or ameliorate the conflict.

II. UNDERSTANDING SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

What is "intergroup conflict?"

In human relations terms, "intergroup conflict" refers to tensions or disputes involving a number of people who group together on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, language, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, or any other group characteristic, and not just on the basis of some common experience.

Conflict between groups differs from conflict between individuals not only because of the numbers of people involved, but because groups have a life and character of their own. For instance, rumors are repeated and often embellished as individuals within a group reinforce one another.

Workforce Reduction and Intergroup Conflict

In stable times, managers and supervisors are able to work on developing and maintaining healthy organizations and work environments. When budgets and workforces are sharply cut, their work is greatly complicated. They must contend with employees who feel threatened, anxious, competitive, and even contentious. Nonetheless, managers and supervisors must make workforce reductions and reorganization decisions that invariably increase tensions. Because of historic employment patterns, the

decision of whether layoffs are based on seniority, affirmative action, or work performance considerations will have different consequences for intergroup relations. For instance, a seniority-based decision might retain White accountants, while laying off African American and Asian accountants. Even where seniority is the sole basis for selecting employees for layoffs, monolingual English-speaking employees, who receive layoff notices while bilingual Spanish-speaking employees are retained, might erroneously presume that the criteria for layoffs was language and cultural skills in communicating with the target service populations. A layoff decision that considered impact on workplace diversity might retain female electricians while laying off equally qualified male electricians who have greater seniority.

Conflict and Culture

The diversity of cultures in a multi-racial/ethnic workplace can be a source of strength, productivity, and creativity.¹ It can also be a source of conflict. Racial and cultural discrimination are present in many intergroup conflicts. Valuing cultural diversity can also play an important role in managing conflict.

“Culture” can be defined as the beliefs, customs, behaviors, traditions, skills, arts, etc., of a group or of a people. Though culture may be transmitted from generation to generation, it is often dynamic and changing.

Each of us is a member of many cultures, including those related to our race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic background, disability, and life experiences. Cultural influences and cultural bonds are everywhere, and overlapping. For example, fourth-generation Mexican-Americans, who may be as comfortable speaking English as Spanish, might or might not be on the same side of a conflict as Central American immigrants over a workplace ban on speaking Spanish. However, if the issue is discrimination against Latinos in layoffs, both groups are likely to be united against the persons responsible for the layoff decisions.

However, *culture also influences perceptions and understanding of conflicts not only because it may lead us to take a side in a dispute, but also because it can determine how we are inclined to deal with tensions and conflicts.*

For instance, culture may play a role in whether we value or resist negotiation as a problem-solving method. We may view it either as a winner-takes-all proposition, or as a way for everyone to get some of what they want and need.

In the negotiations themselves, culture also influences which behaviors signify respect or disrespect to us, and what things make us flinch or flare up. Some cultures are not comfortable empowering a representative to speak for them, while other cultures may prefer entrusting a representative or leader to settle things. Some cultures may feel very reluctant to express their true concerns face-to-face with the other side, while others may prefer confrontation to settle a dispute.

While many people may feel comfortable with the common sense principles that underlie mediation and other conflict intervention approaches, when they are under strain and the stakes are high, people react from their most deeply-held and often subconscious beliefs.

How will this Primer help you?

We hope this Primer will provide managers the information and tools with which they can more quickly and effectively anticipate, recognize and deescalate intergroup hostilities. With rapid recognition and intervention of intergroup conflict, managers can avoid litigation and other methods of conflict resolution that may be more costly to the organization in both human and financial terms.

Note that this Primer is not meant to be a comprehensive text on promoting diversity and positive intergroup relations in the workplace² and with the communities served. Nor does it aim to provide extensive explanations of dispute resolution and conflict management models.

Rather, *this Primer seeks to (1) briefly illuminate how multiple cultures in the workplace affects the development and resolution of conflict; (2) point out some telltale signs of intergroup conflict; and (3) present a step-by-step approach which might be useful in resolving or managing intergroup conflict, including some scenarios that illustrate how mediation would result in a different outcome of the conflict than if other types of managerial responses were used.*



III. STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

A. CONFLICT RESOLUTION METHODS

There are a number of ways conflicts can be resolved. Not all of them will be suitable to your situation.

Third Party Assistance (Mediation, Conciliation, Third Party Consultation)

The mediator, conciliator or third-party consultant is a neutral person who is acceptable to both parties, and whose fundamental role is *to assist the disputants to reach their own solution, not to resolve the dispute for them.* This person takes an active role in discussions without taking sides, helping frame the discussions, facilitating communication and negotiations, promoting trust, and building positive perceptions. Community Boards are a similar form of Third Party Assistance, except that instead of a person, a panel of trained volunteers carries out the mediation.

Arbitration

Arbitration is similar to Third Party Assistance in that disputants must agree upon a third party who will listen to both sides. *But in contrast to Third Party Assistance, the disputants agree to give the third party the authority to decide on a solution.* The arbiter may be a person or a panel. The disputants agree in advance that the arbitration will be “binding,” that is, they will abide by whatever decision the arbiter makes shall be final, or “non-binding,” which means either disputant can reject the decision if they don’t agree.

Litigation

Resolution in the courts. Unlike Third Party Assistance approaches, the judge has the authority to decide which side is “right” and which is “wrong.” Sometimes this is the final step after all else has failed, or the conflict has gotten to the point where all other methods of resolution appear futile.

If intergroup tensions are ignored, they can often grow into the type of conflict that ends

up being resolved by litigation, the most costly method of conflict resolution both in financial and human resources. While arbitration or hearing boards could be employed to address a problem, placing all the decision making power in the hands of a third party has the potential of leaving all the disputants unhappy with the outcome, since it is not their own.

This primer focuses on the less traditional, but often more effective tool of Third Party Assistance — mediation, conciliation, third party consultation — a method of conflict management and resolution which has the advantage of the disputants' commitment to the solution because it is of their own making.

B. AN OVERVIEW OF CONFLICT INTERVENTION

All too often, managers only become aware of an intergroup conflict once it has erupted into major incidents, involving, for example, shouting matches or vandalism. At that point, intervention must focus on some fundamental steps.

1. *Security Planning.* Take steps to ensure the safety and security of all employees, such as not permitting employees to stay after hours when no security guards are on duty, etc.
2. *Stabilize the Situation.* By simply alerting the parties involved that you will be setting up a meeting to address the underlying issues, you have sent a message that the matter is no longer theirs alone to resolve.

You may want to issue a strict directive that no further or only limited contact between the disputing groups should occur until the meeting/mediation. Identify key individuals which can assist in advising you of rumors, which should be confirmed, dispelled, or clarified as quickly as possible, so that they do not further inflame or distort the conflict.

3. *Establish and Communicate Workplace Ground Rules.* If epithets or other offensive language or graphics are being posted in the workplaces, or hostile notes are being left on certain employees’ desks or other personal work spaces, *managers must make it absolutely clear that such behavior will*

not be tolerated, and anyone caught will be disciplined severely. This may also mean establishing methods of working together so that employees at odds will not be placed in a position that would likely further exacerbate the intergroup tensions.

4. *Identify the Presenting Problem.* Meet with the individuals or groups involved to understand the source, or sources, of the tensions or conflict. This is discussed in greater detail below.

5. *Work through emotions.* Give those involved the opportunity to express their anger in safe and effective ways. For example, professional counseling should be made available whenever possible. This also means allowing employees to “vent” prior to any meeting at which both sides are present.

6. *Engage Disputants/Stakeholders.* Once you have identified who the parties in dispute are, including others who may be directly affected by any resolution, you should begin having conversations with them, to understand all facets of the conflict and any potential resolution.

7. *Move from Conflict to Problem Solving.* Employing one of the methods of dispute resolution - mediation, conciliation, third party consultation, arbitration - all of which are discussed in more detail below, will make it possible to move the disputants from conflict to resolution.

C. HOW TO ANTICIPATE AND IDENTIFY POTENTIAL CONFLICT

The earlier managers can recognize signs of intergroup conflict or conditions that have the potential for triggering intergroup conflict, the better position they will be in to take preventive action, or to engage in conflict intervention and management. *While it may seem that an incident arises suddenly, often there is tension long before the intergroup conflict incident.*

Study your workplace environment and employee interaction. Identify groups in the workforce which are in a position of competition and contention.

Keep tuned in to the informal communications networks. If you don't have systems which facilitate communication from the bottom up, set them up now. Anonymous suggestion boxes, bulletin boards, or regular sharing of information at staff meetings are some avenues of communication which can allow employees to freely express concerns. Get to know those staff members who are respected for being fair-minded. *When relations become strained, give them your attention before the problem festers and spreads.*

Make sure you consider the possible role of cultural differences in assessing the source of tension. We are more likely to underestimate the role of cultures in conflicts than to overestimate it.

Take into account the differentials of power among employee groups, and how power relationships intersect with issues of culture and group identity. The absence of complaints by a particular group of employees, for example, custodial staff who are immigrants, does not always indicate that they have no complaints about their treatment by other employees or managers. Their reluctance to complain may be directly related to the vulnerability they feel in this particular job position, and in general as immigrants in society. Managers need to proactively provide safe avenues for them to express concerns.

What conditions exist in the environment where intergroup conflict takes place or where there is potential for intergroup conflict? *Pay attention to warning signs.* Look for patterns of incidents or behavior.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Have you seen an increase in *self-segregation* during working hours by employees such as on breaks, or at lunch time?
2. Are there certain ethnic groups *segregated into particular job categories*?
3. Has there been *contention over new work assignments* or the selection of working teams? *Monitor recent demotions, relocations and changes in supervisors for signs of conflict, especially where such workforce changes have a disproportionate*

impact on certain groups identifiable by race, ethnicity, gender, etc.

4. Is there an increase in the number of *employment-related rumors*? Are employees talking about further layoffs, transfers, or pay cuts?
5. *Do you see intolerance or insensitivity on or near the time of ethnic and cultural days of celebrations*? Sometimes the celebration of special days by certain groups can isolate others and highlight existing intergroup tension.
6. *Are there graffiti, flyers, or other materials or objects in and around work areas that denigrate certain groups*? Are materials being distributed or posted on bulletin boards and other areas that are demeaning to members of any group? These in particular can aggravate intergroup conflict situations.
7. *Have there been racial or sexual jokes or slurs in the workplace*? This can indicate insensitivity, which, if not dealt with, could lead to intergroup conflict. It may also point to scapegoating of groups during "bad times."
8. *Have incidents of vandalism targeted employees or supervisors*? If so, have you discovered information that indicates the vandalism was motivated by intergroup bias or conflict? These could be serious warning signs that intergroup tensions exist in the department or work site.
9. Has there been a *rise in the number of complaints by the recipients of services* in your department or work site? Have these complaints involved race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.?

D. HOW TO ASSESS AND DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Before engaging in intergroup conflict resolution, a manager must assess by what means the incident or problem should be handled. Sometimes conditions are such that no conflict resolution strategies or mediation approaches will help. Serious employee rights violations, violence and security issues, or other discipli-

nary requirements may require bypassing this process altogether. Other situations may require outside assistance from trained mediators.

In assessing the intergroup problem, it is important to gather the core information of the conflict. Below are some of the questions that should be answered:

1. *What do you know about the precipitating incident*? Usually there is an incident that serves as entry point for intervention. What are the facts regarding this incident? Answer the who, what, when, where, and how.
2. Next, get down the *chronology of events surrounding the incident*. If possible, find out what led up to the incident. After the incident, what took place? What actions were taken, by whom, and when?
3. *Assess the volatility of the conflict*. Have there been personal threats? Are there charges of sabotage or vandalism? What is the history of the conflict?
4. *Determine the breadth of the conflict*. Is it department-wide or site specific?
5. *Does it have the potential to spread to other areas or to include other groups*? If it is limited to one site or department, do the groups involved have regular interaction with another site or department? Does the other side or department have the social conditions that make it fertile ground for the conflict to spread to that department or site?
6. *Who are the parties involved? Who are the stakeholders*? How are they affected by the intergroup conflict? How will the stakeholders be impacted by any potential resolution of the conflict? Also, how are the parties identified (racial, ethnic, gender or other identification)?
7. *Are they formally or informally organized as groups*? To what extent can these groups be useful in a mediation or negotiation process? Could they select a representative or spokesperson? Could they assist in gathering information about the history and nature of the conflict? Could

they help disseminate information coming out of the mediation process? Would they be useful in controlling rumors that would likely exacerbate the conflict?

8. *Are there groups outside the immediate conflict involved in the problem?* If so, what are the connections between the parties and the surrounding community or neighborhood? How does this affect the intergroup conflict?
9. *Are the tension levels sufficiently diminished so that a mediation or other resolution process could occur?* For example, you could talk with each group without the other group being present, and find out whether they are ready for productive face-to-face discussions. Judge from the discussion whether they can communicate their concerns to the other side without degenerating into name-calling, or other personal attacks.

E. WHEN YOU SHOULD SEEK AN OUTSIDE PARTY TO MEDIATE THE CONFLICT

If you have identified intergroup tensions or conflict, a question you should ask yourself is: Who should manage the conflict resolution process? Should it be you, another manager or employee, or a team of individuals, managers and non-managers from the inside? Or should you look outside of your workplace for assistance?

One of the most frequent situations calling for someone outside of your department or workplace to mediate is when you, the manager, are perceived as part of the conflict. Your race, national origin, native language, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age or other personal characteristic may in and of itself be the basis for the perception that you would be biased in mediating a conflict involving a group of the same trait. Or either party may see you as favoring the other party.

Whether or not you agree with such a perception, the fact that the perception exists among the parties is reason enough to render ineffective your efforts to mediate. In those situations, we suggest the involvement of a third party for effective conflict resolution. *If possible, take yourself out of the direct manage-*

ment of the conflict and participate in the solution with the parties.

Even if you, as the manager, are perceived by all parties as unbiased, you may still not have the personality, aptitude, skills, or desire to be a successful mediator or conciliator. The most important traits are:

- Cultural awareness
- Active, careful listening skills
- Ability to identify the interests of the disputants
- Ability to focus the discussion
- Neutrality
- Plain talking
- Patience
- Reliability
- Personal integrity

A Special Explanation of "Neutrality"

Neutrality does not mean that the mediator does not have personal opinions regarding the outcome of the dispute. No one can be totally impartial.

Rather, a neutral mediator is one who has no personal stake in the outcome of the dispute being mediated. A neutral mediator should not have a relationship with either disputant such that the mediator may benefit or be disadvantaged by the actions or decisions of the disputant. The same concern applies to past or future relationships between the mediator and either party.

Neutrality also refers to the ability to remain neutral in the process. It comes down to the following questions: Could you, as the mediator, be confident that your opinions about the outcome of the dispute do not interfere with your ability to understand the views of the disputants? Are you sure that your own opinion won't lead you to favoring one side over the other when shaping the discussions? Will you be capable of helping the parties make their own decisions, without feeling the need to influence them to adopt or include you own idea of what the outcome should be?

Multi cultural/multiracial dispute resolution teams may be a smart option, since they might have more credibility to disputants, and could be illustrative of successful collaboration.

The mediator may be called upon to assume a variety of roles³, which include:

- *The opener of communication channels*, who initiates communication, or if the parties are already talking, facilitates better communication.
- *The legitimizer*, who helps all parties recognize the rights of others to be involved in negotiations.
- *The process facilitator*, who sets up procedures and usually chairs the mediation or negotiation sessions.
- *The resource expander*, who provides procedural assistance to the parties and links them to outside experts — such as other dispute resolution professionals, lawyers, technical experts, decisionmakers — and resources, such as additional bargaining chips to put on the negotiating table — that may enable them to enlarge acceptable settlement options.
- *The problem explorer*, who enables disputants to examine a problem from a variety of viewpoints, to articulate basic issues and interests, and looks for mutually satisfactory options.
- *The realist*, who questions and challenges parties who have extreme and unrealistic goals, and helps build a reasonable and workable settlement.
- *The scapegoat*, who may take some of the responsibility or blame for an unpopular decision that, nevertheless, the parties are willing to accept. This enables them to save face, and where appropriate, gain the support of their constituents.
- *The leader*, who takes the initiative to move the negotiations forward by procedural or substantive suggestions.
- *The trainer*, who educates unskilled, novice, or unprepared negotiators in the bargaining process.



IV. THE MEDIATION PROCESS: STEP BY STEP

A. PREPARING FOR MEDIATION

Even before any face-to-face meeting occurs, you as the mediator want to be sure the proper groundwork has been done. In addition to the fact investigation, analyzing the parties' interests, thinking about formulating the terms of the dispute in a constructive way, you should consider doing the following:

Speak to the parties individually in advance to address any concerns or objections they might have to you serving as the mediator.

You may want to use this opportunity to go over the mediation process and stress your role as assuring an unbiased process, even if you may have, or be perceived to have, a bias as to the outcome.

Find out if differences in English language ability among the parties requires interpreters to be present. You should try to avoid the inequality inherent in forcing any of the parties to engage in the mediation in a language which does not allow them to express her or himself to the best of her or his abilities.

Determine if there are other imbalances in power between the parties that would make the more powerful party unwilling to engage in meaningful negotiations. If such imbalance does exist, consider what actions can be taken prior or during the mediation to lessen the power differential. This may mean simply talking to the party about the potential negative consequences, which they may have not fully considered, that may flow from the failure to find a mediated solution. Giving training on negotiation skills to both parties before the mediation may help "level the playing field."

B. OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIATION ITSELF

Here is an overview of the mediation process, stage by stage. It is taken from the handbook "Mediation Across Cultures." (The basic

principles of mediation are applicable as well to the conflicts between organizations and the populations they serve, though other kinds of information may be needed, and the issues to consider in the process can be more complex.)

Stage 1: Opening the Mediation. This stage sets the tone for the mediation as an informal participatory process in which first names are used, individuality is respected, and confidentiality may be necessary as a precondition for open discussion. (It should be noted here that some cultures are more formal than others and first names may not always be an acceptable form of address. Be sure to ask the participants what form of address they prefer. This is an important opportunity for the mediator to show respect for the participants' cultural norms.)

Step 1: Set Expectations of Disputants

These expectations include acceptance of personal responsibility, willingness to try to resolve issues and to accept the ground rules, allowing ample time for each disputant to speak, showing mutual respect, and abiding by established time constraints.

Step 2: Explain Procedures

The mediator should explain his or her non-judgmental role as a facilitator who explains how the process works, confidentiality, scheduling additional sessions, use of a caucus, and availability to answer questions.

Step 3: Transition & Summary of the Situation

The mediator constructs a common problem statement/definition, which summarizes in a few sentences what the issues are that have brought the disputants together to seek mediation, e.g., "We are here today to talk about some issues that have come up at school (work, neighborhood, etc.)," not "We are going to talk about how to change your attitudes about each other."

Stage 2: Information Sharing & Issue Identification. This stage of the mediation should allow the participants (perhaps for the first time) an opportunity to explain their individual perspectives on the conflict. The mediator's role is to listen, ascertain the disputants'

understanding of the issues, and mentally construct an agenda for the next stage.

Step 1: Disputants Free to Speak

The disputants speak in turn without interruptions, adhering to previously agreed upon time limits.

Step 2: Mediator Summarizes

The mediator lists key areas of differences and notes commonalities. If possible, the mediator should assist the parties to construct a common problem definition or statement.

Step 3: Transition to Problem-Solving Mode

The mediator constructs an issue agenda, briefly reviewing areas of agreement and difference and framing them as points to discuss. It is also essential at this stage to jointly identify and decide when and how to include any other parties or information critical to the resolution of the conflict.

Stage 3: Exchange & Negotiation. The goal in this stage is to develop understanding of each other's point of view and to identify the real interests that underlie each party's position.

Step 1: Participants Speak to Each Other

Under the mediator's direction, participants speak to each other first on identifying problems or views they share, and then on conflict issues, as framed by the mediator. Whenever possible, use issues that emphasize mutual interests as beginning topics to practice constructive communication.

Step 2: Mediator Urges Strategic Paraphrasing

This paraphrasing is designed to reinforce common understandings and to recognize that feelings and concerns about issues are as much "data" as facts and figures, and to encourage disputants to speak to each other. When parties discuss feelings or reactions, mediators must take care to make sure that each person is being heard in the way in which he or she wants to be heard. The parties may be asked to explain in their own words the other person's position in a way that is acceptable to the other party.

Step 3: Establishing Groundrules and Timeframes

The mediator may also want to establish groundrules, agreed to by all parties, regarding target time frames for further information gathering, assessment, analysis, and resolution.

Step 4: Transition to Agreement Stage

Using brainstorming, an option-generating technique, will develop ideas that address each party's interests or concerns, and encourage the consideration of a wide-range of creative options before any evaluation. In this way, the mediator increases the likelihood of reaching a solution that fits the unique needs of the participants. Often, the most conventional resolutions occur early in a brainstorming session. However, other suggestions more likely to lead to compliance often come after traditional solutions are exhausted. Mediators must be careful not to be too free to inject their personal suggestions, but instead to make sure that the parties are voluntarily moving toward their own resolutions.

Stage 4: Agreement & Conclusion. During this stage the disputants resolve or narrow the issues through exploring options and realistic alternatives.

Step 1: Mediator Orchestrates Examination of Creative Options

At this point, each party is encouraged to suggest possible options for resolving the dispute with a focus on personal responsibility: What you are willing to do rather than what you want the other person to do.

Step 2: Criteria for Evaluation of Options

Under the direction of the mediator, a list of criteria is generated with all disputants contributing. These criteria are "objective" in the sense that they are chosen as impartial standards by which to evaluate the various options. They may be concrete (like professional appraisals of value) or more intangible (like, "Whatever we decide will have to include Juan's need for more independence.") the point is that the parties need to feel that the agreement is fair. This is more likely to happen if the disputants can connect the options to cri-

teria that they have agreed to use in evaluating Juan's options.

Step 3: Selection of Options

Based on mutually agreed upon criteria, the parties select options. The mediator may write up an agreement using the parties' own terminology. Sometimes the parties prefer oral agreements, but at least write it out on paper or chalkboard for all to read, even if it is later erased or destroyed. Written agreements may be preferable because they are less subject to misinterpretation as memories fade, but on the other hand, some parties may feel more respected if, rather than a piece of paper, their word is their bond.

The non-judgmental nature of a mediation process and the practical nature of the agreements that emerge from it are reasons to support its use in resolving conflicts resulting from cultural "clashes." Respect and acceptance are its desired results. Opportunities for disputants to broaden understanding and meet the challenge of taking personal responsibility are its hallmarks.

C. POST-MEDIATION: KEEPING THE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN

Once you have achieved a mediated solution, you want to avoid where possible the repetition of conflict. Especially if the solution is only partial or temporary, it is important for you as manager to think proactively.

Create procedures and protocols for conflicts to get identified, aired and resolved at the earliest possible moment. This may mean requiring managers or supervisors to assess the potential and signs for intergroup conflict in the workplace on a monthly basis or at other regular intervals of time. It could also mean, as discussed above, creating an anonymous suggestion box, or regular lunches with employees, or establishing other safe channels for employees to express their concerns.

Where the conflict arises from self-segregation, it may also mean creating work and non-work activities and restructuring work relationships in ways which encourage employees to spend

time together in non-work settings, and giving them the chance to share the commonalities in their lives (for example, sharing the difficulties of parenting, the pride of family members' or friends' accomplishments, or personal losses).

If the conflict comes from perceiving certain groups being favored by the management, take a hard look at your hiring and promotion record, and think creatively of ways to diversify your workforce at all levels. Review the ways you advertise your job openings and the criteria you use for hiring and promotion. Can you change them in a manner which gives greater weight and value to diversity? *Should you be giving incentives and opportunities for employees of underrepresented groups (but available to all) to develop skills that will prepare them to be promoted when the positions become open?*

These are just some of a multitude of affirmative steps you can take to promote a work environment which not only reduces intergroup conflict, but tap the wealth of advantages of a diverse, multiracial and multicultural workforce. The important point is to not end the process after arriving at a mediated solution to a given conflict.



V. THE MEDIATION METHOD AT WORK: Two Examples

Case 1: The “English Only” Problem

Ron and Cathy work in an office, and take offense when their office co-workers, Eduardo and Manuela, speak and joke with each other in Spanish. Ron and Cathy, who might have little contact with Eduardo and Manuela in the course of their work, believe that they are being talked about and laughed at. It is causing hard feelings and a growing rift among their respective peer groups, Spanish and non-Spanish speakers.

Too often, the supervisor’s response to Ron and Cathy’s complaints is to come in and

*demand that Spanish not be spoken, except at breaks, because, according to the supervisor, it is rude and causing divisions among the employees.** Alternatively, the supervisor might tell Ron and Cathy to simply accept the fact that others speak to each other in a different language, and to pay attention to more important things in the office.

A more enlightened approach would be to have a bilingual-manager or peer-mediator bring the two sides together to talk about the issues, and to work out a mutually acceptable resolution.

Elements of their resolution could include, for example, that Ron and Cathy agree to be more willing to accept that Eduardo and Manuela speak Spanish because they understand it is what is natural for them, and it is not to deliberately prevent others from understanding. In turn, Eduardo and Manuela agree to limit the use of Spanish on their own terms, being more conscious of the fact that speaking in Spanish makes those non-Spanish speakers nearby feel purposefully excluded, as if they are whispering about them. Eduardo and Manuela might also agree to translate jokes into English and teach some Spanish to Ron and Cathy, while Ron and Cathy promise to make an effort to include Eduardo and Manuela in their own conversations and activities. Both sides might decide to talk about differences in their cultures.

The outcome, whatever its elements, will be their own; not one imposed by a judge or supervisor. In the process, disputants have the opportunity to better understand each other’s culture and to actually gain strength from their diversity.

Case 2: Blaming Accents

Aida and Michael are Filipino-Americans who are upset because in a recent round of layoffs based on seniority, several co-workers who are Filipino-Americans were laid off, while none or few of their White and African-American

*The imposition of “English Only” workplace rules may very well constitute a violation of State and Federal anti-discrimination laws. Before issuing such directives, you should consult with the Human Resources or Affirmative Action offices.

co-workers lost their jobs. Aida, Michael, and a few other Filipino co-workers feel that the layoff decision was unfair, and they resent the Whites and African Americans who still have their jobs. Aida makes the comment to Michael that she thinks that the decision was unfair because many of the Whites and African Americans are not competent. James, one of the African American employees, overhears the comment, and tells several other White and African American employees, that the Filipinos think everyone else is incompetent. Word spreads, and people in that group become angry at Filipinos. The anger and resentment of both groups begins to be expressed in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For example, persons from one group refuse to let someone from the other group, who wants to copy only one page, interrupt their long copying job even if it would only take a moment. Before long, that person then retaliates in some other way. Emotions play off one another and tensions grow between the group of Filipino-Americans and the group of Whites and African Americans.

Soon, James and the others begin to complain that they cannot understand Aida, Michael and several other Filipino co-workers, because of their accents. Persistent complaints about their accents are made to the manager, on occasion accompanied by a refusal to work with Filipinos because “I can’t understand what they’re saying.”

A supervisor’s response might be to segregate the Filipino employees from the others, and when it comes time for performance evaluations, to list the accent as a problem to be improved.** Alternatively, the supervisor might tell James and the others that they should just live with it, because there’s nothing that can be done about it.

A better solution would be for the manager to assess the situation, and recognize that the

tensions have to do with the layoffs, and the dispute over whether accents are making communication difficult is merely an outgrowth or symptom of the resentment caused by the disproportionate impact of the layoffs and misunderstood or mischaracterized comments.

A mediator might assist the two groups to sit down and identify the core issues of the tensions, and to work out some measures to address their concerns.

For example, *benefits of the mediation* could be that Aida, Michael, and the other Filipinos clarify that they do not believe all the others to be incompetent. Rather, they believe that if the layoff decisions were based on performance or ability to work with the communities served by the department, rather than seniority, then it would not be only the Filipino employees who would have been laid off. James and the others might agree that it would have been fairer to do the layoffs by these other factors, in addition to considering seniority as a factor. Both sides might agree that they will ask management to assure that any future layoffs be decided by taking into account more factors than merely seniority.

Also, the issue of the accents may very well disappear with the elimination of the underlying resentment about the layoffs. The sides may also agree that any workplace segregation of the Filipino employees from the others would perpetuate a tense and divisive environment, and that instead, there should be increased pairing of Filipino with non-Filipino employees, so that the non-Filipinos could improve their ability to understand the Filipino accent. In the process of understanding the characteristics of the Pilipino language which make it difficult to pronounce all the sounds in the English language, there can also be a sharing of commonalities and distinctions in their cultures.

**Taking adverse actions against certain employees or applicants due to their accents may violate State and Federal laws against discrimination based on national origin. You would be wise to consult with the Human Resources or Affirmative Action offices *before* taking such actions.



CONCLUSION

If you don't proactively address tensions among employees and the conditions which may create those tensions, you run the peril of confronting a problem down the road which can only be resolved by formal grievance procedures or lawsuits.

Tools that are key to the mediation process are also key to cultural sensitivity. For that reason, mediation is an especially useful process for managing intergroup conflicts arising from diversity.

From a practical standpoint, managers have a clear choice. They can choose to invest time and resources in developing systems that will make workforce diversity an asset. Or they can ignore the issue, hoping it will go away, and invest more time and money in dealing with problems once they've festered and erupted. Training your managers to be skilled in mediation and other conflict management techniques is one tool in managing diversity.

A comprehensive approach to creating and managing a multicultural workforce would also include improving outreach and selection procedures in hiring and promotions, reinforcing intergroup understanding through regular activities and specialized training, rewarding behavior and actions which promote intercultural understanding, strengthening investigation and disciplinary procedures related to intolerant or bigoted behavior, and undertaking other measures necessary to transform the institutional culture.

By following the steps outlined in this Primer, you may be able to more effectively manage any intergroup conflicts which might arise, and to ultimately improve intergroup relations in your workplace. Employees who can work harmoniously in a multi-cultural environment are also likely to serve multiethnic populations more effectively with greater sensitivity to cultural differences and distinct needs.

NOTES

1. Thomas, R. Roosevelt, Jr., *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity*, New York: AMACOM (a division of the American Management Association), 1991.
2. Ibid.
3. This list of the roles a mediator can play is adapted from the CDR Training Manual, 1986. CDR (Communications/Decisions/Results) may be contacted at: 100 Arapahoe Avenue, Suite 12, Boulder, Colorado, 80302, (303) 442-7367 or 1-800-MEDIATE.
4. Meyers, Selma, and Filner, Barbara, Mediation Across Cultures: A Handbook About Conflict & Culture, Amherst Educational Publishing, 1994. For a copy of the handbook contact: Amherst Educational Publishing, 30 Blue Hills Road, Amherst, MA 01002, (800) 865-5549.
5. Thomas, R. Roosevelt, Jr., *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity*, supra, p. 72 et seq.

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